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AUTHOR Chance, Edward W.
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ABSTRACT

This study of rural schools in the states of North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas focused on self-reported characteristics of secondary school principals as well as their leadership style. A total of 592 surveys were mailed to the identified population, of whom 462 returned completed forms. It was found that the Great Plains rural principals envision themselves as instructional leaders but spend a majority of the day in general management. They taught for an average of 35.6% of the day. They also are more concerned as leaders about task completion and less about school climate and individual needs. It was also found that there were no substantial differences between male and female rural principals, either experienced or inexperienced, in their general activities or leadership style. Great Plains rural principals perceive themselves in one manner, but they often act in another manner. Several possibilities account for this discrepancy, but time, teaching assignments, and the multitude of administrative duties are the most likely causes. If the perception of instructional leadership is ever to become reality, rural principals must be provided more opportunities to become effective leaders. (TES)

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The Great Plains Rural Principal: Characteristics and Leadership Style

Edward W. Chance
Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
College of Education
University of Oklahoma

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Abstract

This study of rural schools in the states of North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas focused on self reported characteristics of secondary school principals as well as their leadership style. A total of 592 surveys were mailed to the identified population and returned by 462. It was found that the Great Plains rural principals envision themselves as instructional leaders but spend a majority of the day in general management while they taught for an average of 35.6% of the day. They also are more concerned , as leaders, about task completion and less about school climate and individual needs. It was also found that there were no substantial differences between male and female rural principals, either experienced or inexperienced in their general activities or leadership style. It is concluded that the Great Plains rural principals perceive themselves in one manner but often act in another manner. There are several possibilities for this, but time, teaching assignments, and the multitude of administrative duties are most likely.

The Great Plains Rural Principal:

Characteristics and Leadership Style

The decade of the 1980's with its emphasis on educational reform and the development of effective schools has managed to reinforce the view that the building principal is vital in any type of systematic educational improvement. Research has continued to provide evidence that building level leadership is a key to achieving effective outcomes in schools (Austin, 1978; Edmonds, 1979; Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, Ouston & Smith, 1979). Ellis (1986) and Lipham (1978) asserted that schools are rarely effective unless the principal is an instructional leader. The U.S. Department of Education booklet, Principal Selection Guide, (1987), indicated that "effective school leaders have broad visions that are clear, active, ambitious, and performance-oriented" (p. 5). Austin and Garber (1985) identified instructional leadership, an openness to change, and well established goals in planning and decision making as crucial components for administrative success. While it is clear that the debate may continue as to the types of behaviors exhibited by effective leaders, there is virtually no doubt that the principal is an important, critical

figure in the creation and maintenance of an effective school (Russell, 1985; Lipham, 1978).

The search for evidence of how effective leaders partition and utilize their time is somewhat less clear, although some research has suggested that a great deal of time is allocated by the most effective principals for clarifying educational goals with staff, students, parents and community members (Leithwood and Montgomery, 1985; Shoemaker, 1981). This research has also indicated that truly effective principals focused extensively on facilitating communication; developing and maintaining interpersonal relationships; motivating others within the educational community; and providing knowledge, expertise, and guidance. Keefe (1987) discussed the need for building administrators to possess a clear, organized plan for implementing instructional leadership. He indicated that effective administrators were good organizers, planners, and collaborators.

Glatthorn and Newburg (1984) addressed the issue of the difficulties that are encountered when one attempts to do everything effective instructional leaders must do while confronted with a multitude of other time consuming demands. They asserted that

effective leaders share leadership with others and delegate as necessary. These effective leaders were identified as consensus seekers in their desire to achieve educational goals. A research summary by the Northwest Regional Laboratory (April, 1984) argued that effective principals who are concerned about the curriculum and student progress strive to establish systems that consistently improve instructional effectiveness. Conversely, Leithwood and Montgomery (1985) indicated that less effective administrators often were those who envisioned the school and its goals in somewhat vague terms. These principals often saw as their primary goal the maintenance of the status quo. Rutherford (1985) also found that less effective administrators had no vision for their schools, but instead focused on maintaining tranquility.

While the research continually seeks to identify various critical administrative attributes and actions which positively impact on the excellence and effectiveness of the school, the overall focus has been on larger, urban school systems (Edmonds, 1979; Austin, 1978; Rutter, et al., 1979). There are several possibilities for this which relate to both the accessibility of school sites and the personal

preferences of researchers. Few studies are found that specifically address the small school rural principal and his/her attributes, behaviors, and leadership style that may either contribute to or hamper rural school effectiveness. Buttram and Carlson (1983) stated that urban and rural schools often paralleled each other except for minor cultural or environmental differences. Tursman (1981), in a study of effective rural schools, found that strong instructional leadership was a key to the development of an effective rural school. Certainly, although there are often extensive contextual differences between urban and rural schools, it would behoove the rural administrator to utilize, with some necessary environmental modifications, the research on effective leadership and schools.

It is quite obvious that there is continued emphasis on the principal as being a key to the creation of an effective school which focuses on excellence and equity for all. It is also clear that a majority of the research has had the urban school as its focal point. However, rural schools and rural America are a reality, and the need to expand the knowledge base on rural school leadership and the

manner in which rural schools function has been too long a neglected phenomenon.

Methodology

Due to the continued, intense focus on the building level administrator as the key to developing, implementing, and maintaining an effective learning environment for all students and staff, a decision was made to survey all rural school secondary principals in the Great Plains states of South Dakota, North Dakota, Kansas, and Nebraska. Schools selected for survey purposes were those with a high school population of less than 150 students. Location of the schools was not considered as critical since the Great Plains states are primarily rural. It was understood and accepted that there might be minor aberrations to this selection criteria but they were not viewed as crucial to the results. A total of 592 questionnaires were mailed to the principals in the four states. The principals' names, school size, and location were obtained from individual state department documents or directories. An overall return rate of 78% was achieved with a range of 91.5% from South Dakota to a low of 67.9% from North Dakota. Table I provides details as to each state as well return rate by sex.

Insert Table 1 about here

The survey consisted of two separate instruments. One instrument was a descriptive, self reporting questionnaire consisting of 25 general questions relating to various characteristics of the individual respondents as well as various administrative duties and activities. The second component of the survey was a leadership style questionnaire, consisting of ten scenarios or questions with three possible answers to each question or scenario. The respondent was asked to rank the components or possibilities in each question, with a 3 being the most likely choice, a 2 indicating the next possible answer, and a 1 representing the least likely selection. The various responses were then equated to leadership decisions representing task orientation, climate maintenance, or individual concern.

Results-Findings

The Great Plains Rural Principals

The results of the self reported questionnaire revealed the following about the 462 small school respondents:

1. Ninety-seven percent were male and only 3% were female.
2. The typical principal had been a classroom teacher for 7.95 years before becoming an administrator.
3. The Great Plains rural principal has been an administrator for an average of 10.8 years.
4. Eighty-seven percent indicated they would go into administration again if given the choice, while 13% stated they would remain in the classroom or would elect to pursue a different profession.
5. The average principal has been in the current school for approximately 9.2 years.

The typical principal also reported that he/she arrives at school approximately 52 minutes before the day begins and remains 64 minutes after the school day is over. Because of the nature of tasks in the small school, 75% of those responding indicated that they taught periodically in their teaching area while 48% were teaching-principals and were contractually assigned both teaching and administrative duties. Of those assigned both duties, approximately 35.6% of the day was spent in teaching. In addition to teaching and

daily administrative duties, the average principal reported attending 3 or 4 extracurricular events per week while 18% of the respondents indicated they attended 5 or more activities per week.

The typical rural principal indicated an attempt at maintaining a high profile in classrooms, hallways, and faculty lounges throughout the day. Although 99.5% indicated a preference for high visibility, only 9% reported being in classrooms on a daily basis. Sixty-three percent indicated they were in the classrooms once a month or less often. In order to maintain effective lines of communication, 46% of the principals reported holding monthly faculty meetings while 31% held bi-weekly or weekly meetings. The remainder of the respondents indicated faculty meetings were scheduled whenever they believed they were needed. Ninety-three percent indicated a conscious attempt at keeping teachers informed of Board of Education or Superintendent decisions. Almost all (99%) reported that students and teachers feel free to discuss matters of importance with them at any time. Although most indicated that this "open" relationship existed within the school, only 89% reported that they praise teachers on a regular basis for good work. A common statement

from the rural principal was that this is an area that they needed to consciously work on in providing recognition for quality instruction.

In the area of staff development, 93% of the rural principals indicated they normally attend in-service activities, while 74.8% reported they actively assist in conducting staff development sessions. Regular attendance at state administrative conferences was indicated by a vast majority, however only 24% of the responding principals had ever attended a national convention. The 109 principals who had attended national conferences indicated an average attendance rate of 3.13 national conventions. There may be several plausible reasons for failure to attend national conventions, but certainly the most logical ones relate to geographic location of the surveyed schools, prohibitive costs, and the fact that such a large percentage (48%) of the principals were also assigned teaching duties. However, the typical Great Plains rural principal indicated an attempt at maintaining current knowledge regarding educational mandates and reform. Ninety-seven percent or 448 principals stated that they had read some of the national reports. The average was 3.4 for those who

provided a number of the reports read. Although, this average may seem low when one considers the number of reports published, what is even more remarkable is that 3% of the respondents indicated they had read none of reports that have been issued over the past decade.

When asked to identify their primary jobs as rural administrators, 58% stated that their first priority was to be an instructional leader. Discipline (20%) and management (19%) were a distant second and third. However, the fulfillment of this role is simply not evidenced upon further examination of the reported data. The surveyed principals were asked to estimate the percentage of time spent on a daily basis in four areas. The averaged responses were as follows:

48.3% on general managerial duties

11.5% on working directly with teachers

22.3% on disciplining students, and

6.8% on meeting with parents.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to be an instructional leader when a typical day is spent as indicated. It is especially difficult for rural principals to be an instructional leaders when 48% of them teach and the average teaching load is 35.6% of the school day. These findings indicate an important

contradiction between the perceived role of the Great Plains rural principal and the actual role. The most likely explanation for this contradiction centers upon a conflict between what should be one's role in an idealistic sense, and what is in actuality, provided the realistic restraints of time and daily organizational expectations. Rural principals desire to see themselves in a certain manner because they know that research proves that this is the best mode of performance. However, that desire of being an instructional leader is too often nullified by the daily intrusion of inescapable reality.

A final contradiction exists in this portion of the reported data, and that is the belief that schools actively seek and recruit their own graduates. The data simply fails to support this. Only 16.9% indicated they were born or reared in the same area in which they were serving as administrators. Fully 83.1% were born and reared 100 miles or more from their current school. Certainly distances, size, and isolation of the rural school in the Great Plains states has something to do with this. Optimistically, a more idealistic answer would be that the best administrator possible is hired and that more and more

districts are ceasing to perpetuate the "intellectual incest" of the past when they hired only their own graduates.

Gender Differences. In addition to reviewing the data of the Great Plains rural principal in a homogeneous format, it was decided to ascertain if there were any significant characteristic differences between male and female rural principals. Although the number of female rural administrators was quite small (N=13), it was still deemed to be an important and significant group. Surprisingly, the reported differences between male and female administrators were limited. The major areas of disparity were:

1. Male prinicpals had an average of 10.9 years of administrative experience while female administrators averaged 8.8 years.
2. Women principals had served an average of 11.2 years in their current district while men indicated an average of 9.1 years. This, when contrasted with years of experience, would indicate that women had generally been teachers in the school system prior to becoming an administrator in the district.

3. Forty-six percent of the female administrators held weekly faculty meetings while only 18% of the males did so.
4. Only one female administrator had attended a national convention while 108 men indicated attendance.
5. One hundred percent of the women maintained they would go into administration again while only 87% of the men so reported.

Perhaps the most significant difference between the male and female principals concerned the manner in which the average school day was spent. Seventy-seven percent of the females indicated their primary job was as an instructional leader but only 58% of the men held this view. However, both groups indicated that the majority of their daily routine was consumed by general managerial duties. Contact with teachers and student discipline were ranked second and third, respectively, in relation to the amount of time both groups allocated to these activites. Considerably less time was devoted to the latter two than to general management. Upon further examination of how the typical day was spent, it was found that 80% of the women were contractually assigned both teaching and administrative duties with

an average of 48% of the day involved in instruction. Only 47% of the male rural principals were assigned both administrative and teaching duties with the men teaching an average of 35% of the day. It is clear that the concept of instructional leadership is significantly impacted when one teaches between 1/3 and 1/2 of the school day; and, that the female rural principal, because of the heavier teaching load, would be substantially impaired in providing effective instructional leadership when compared to her male counterpart.

Experience Differences and Socialization. It was also resolved to examine the data in light of the concept of bureaucratic socialization. Bridges (1965) and Wiggins (1970) indicated that principals often begin their careers in a much less bureaucratic, and task oriented manner but as time passes the socialization process molds them into a role designed to maintain stability and the administrator submerges his/her personality and individual beliefs. In order to ascertain if this were true of the Great Plains rural principal, a comparison was made of those administrators with five years or less experience to those with fifteen years or more experience.

Leadership styles and responses relating to utilization of time and primary task devotion were compared The rural principal with five years or less experience represented 28% of the respondents and those rural administrators with fifteen years or more experience represented an almost exact proportion of 27% of the total. Each group identified its primary task as that of instructional leader with manager and disciplinarian a remote second and third. Curriculum designer, the fourth choice, was identified as a primary task by less than 6% of the respondents in both groups. Table 2 provides detailed information.

Insert Table 2 about here.

The data indicated that both groups utilized their time in a similar manner. The largest portion of each day was focused on general managerial duties followed by working with teachers, discipline, and, lastly, working with parents. (see Table 3).

Insert Table 3 about here.

Leadership style, more extensively discussed in a subsequent portion of this paper, was also found to be significantly similar. The data reflects a marked consistency, rather than a disparity, between the two groups' focus, leadership styles, and daily activities. Because of the similarities between experienced administrators and relatively inexperienced principals, the concept of bureaucratic socialization, is not supported in this case.

Leadership

Responses to the second instrument, consisting of leadership questions and scenarios, provided further insight into the Great Plains rural principal. The data gathered from the questionnaire was to answer these central questions: What is the leadership approach that best characterizes the rural Great Plains secondary school principal? Were the female respondents' leadership style significantly different from that of their male counterparts? Were those principals with five years or less administrative experience different in their leadership style when compared to rural principals with fifteen years or more experience?

The return rate for the leadership style questionnaire was 69.7% versus the overall rate of 78% for the first instrument. One female and 48 males either did not return the second questionnaire or returned it incomplete.

The questionnaire consisted of ten statements regarding various situations or scenarios with three possible attitudes or actions that could be selected. The rural principals were asked to place a "3" by their preferred action or attitude, a "2" by their second choice, and a "1" by the action they would least likely select. For instance, a statement such as "A primary objective of a leader is" would then be followed by three possibilities that the responding principal would rank order. Each possible choice correlated to one of three identified leadership style orientations: (a) task, (b) climate, or (c) concern for the individual. Respondent's rankings for each chosen selection within the ten situations were averaged to obtain a mean response. Means of the principals' rankings correlating to each of the three leadership orientations were then totaled. Totals could range from a minimum of 10 to a maximum of 30. The higher

the total in each leadership orientation, the greater the tendency toward that particular leadership style.

Although the overall leadership approach of the Great Plains rural principal is somewhat varied, it is clear that the Great Plains rural administrator more often makes decisions that are task oriented. Task orientation, with a mean composite score of 22.5, was more often selected than individual concerns (19.47) or climate (18.03). When male rural principals were compared to female rural principals, it was found that while both were task oriented, the female rural principal's task composite score of 24 was much higher than that of the male rural principal's 22.4. Concerns for the individual was ranked second for both groups. The female rural principals' composite was 19.75 while the males' was 19.47. Climate was markedly lower for the female rural administrator, with a mean composite score of 16.25 while the male rural principal's composite was a bit higher at 18.1.

The leadership styles of rural principals with five years or less experience were also contrasted with those of rural administrators with greater than fifteen years of experience. It was found that there was essentially no difference in leadership orientation

scores for either group, although female scores relating to task were generally higher than male scores in both groups. Mean composite scores for rural principals with less than five years experience were 22.6 for task, 19.4 for individual concerns, and 18 for climate. The rural administrator with fifteen years or more experience had mean composite scores of 22.4 for task, 19.5 for individual concerns, and 18.1 for climate. The similarity of these scores provides the basis for the prior statement that the rural principal appears to remain remarkably constant and consistent throughout his/her career and supports the conclusion that bureaucratic socialization relating to leadership is at a minimum among this particular group. A strong unmistakable commitment to task orientation appears to exist in both male and female rural principals, experienced or not.

This task orientation of the Great Plains rural principal conflicts with the principals' views of being instructional leaders and maintaining open doors. It does support the fact that the principals allotted a large portion of their time to general management and the daily functioning of the school. The data indicates that the Great Plains rural principal, male

or female, experienced or inexperienced, is least likely to adopt a leadership style which stresses either a human relations (individual) or climate approach. Certainly, the rural principal's propensity and highest priority is to accomplish the task and get the job successfully completed.

If there is a conflict here, it obviously lies in the perception of the rural principals. They appear to perceive themselves as instructional leaders, but the simple truth is that, when necessary, a more direct and task (autocratic) oriented response becomes their mode of operation.

Conclusions

Great Plains rural principals appear to be committed individuals who are vigorously involved in a variety of daily educational activities, teaching, and the maintenance of the school. They are, for the most part, content in their administrative role and enjoy the challenges of the job. The average tenure in their district indicates they are not transitory in nature and view the local school district as their home. They generally seek to improve themselves through local and state staff development activities. Their involvement in professional organizations at the national level is

minimal with only 24% having attended a national convention. Certainly economics, geographic location, and the broad scope of their contractual duties are logical reasons for their limited attendance at national conferences.

They perceive themselves as instructional leaders but spend the greatest portion of their day focusing on general managerial duties. They indicate they are highly visible in their school and attend a great number of extracurricular activities yet they are rarely in their teachers' classrooms. Their leadership is varied but when it is necessary to get the job accomplished they tend to become fundamentally task oriented. Concern for climate and individual needs become lost in the daily tasks of teaching, managing, disciplining, and attending school related activities. Amazingly, this task oriented leadership style is a constant whether they are new administrators or experienced veterans. Female administrators indicated an even greater task orientation than did their male counterparts.

This is not meant to label the Great Plains rural principals as good or bad, effective or ineffective. They may idealistically prefer to utilize other

leadership approaches but the need to address the multitude of daily tasks often makes time their most precious resource as well as their most baneful enemy. Sadly, maintenance of the organizational structure often takes precedence over all other concerns.

If the perception of instructional leadership is ever to become reality, rural principals must be provided opportunities to become effective leaders. Communities and local Boards of Education must realize that when their administrators teach a third of the day and are not allowed to grow professionally by attending national conferences their schools will never reach their potential. Rural administrators must learn to delegate some of the daily management to their staff. Empowerment of others is a potent leadership approach. Building level leadership is the key to effectiveness and rural principals must be provided opportunity and assistance in becoming discernable instructional leaders.

Finally, the rural school is here to stay. Rural schools, and their constituents, must stop believing the myth that small means the school can't do as much. Rural schools, instead of feeling handicapped, should explore the opportunities that ruralness provides.

These opportunities can range from utilizing smaller cohesive staffs to flexibility in scheduling to the use of teaming and cooperative learning activities. Rural administrators, teachers, and students are part of the rural reality that needs to be further explored and evaluated in the search for an effective educational system.

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Table 1. Great Plains Rural Principal Survey Return Rate

	Surveys Mailed	Surveys Returned	Percentage	Male Returns (n=)	Percentage	Female Returns (n=)	Percentage
North Dakota	184	125	67.9%	N=118	94.4%	N=7	5.6%
South Dakota	118	108	91.5%	N=105	97.2%	N=3	2.8%
Nebraska	150	123	82%	N=121	98.4%	N=2	1.6%
Kansas	140	106	75.7%	N=105	99.5%	N=1	.05%
Overall	592	462	785	449	97.2%	13	2.8%

Table 2. Manner in Which Administrators Envision their Primary Job

	5 years or less administrative experience			15 years of more administrative experience		
	Male (n=129)	Female (n=2)	Overall (n=131)	Male (n=125)	Female (n=2)	Overall (n=127)
Instructional Leader	58.9%	50%	58.8%	56.8%	50%	57%
Disciplinarian	49.4%	50%	19.9%	17.8%		18.1%
Manager	21.6%		20.6%	20%	50%	20.5%
Curriculum Designer	0.85		0.5%	4.8%		4.7%

NOTE: Numbers represent percent of total responses.

Table 3. Mean Percentage of Administrative Time Allocated to Daily Activities

	5 years or less administrative experience			15 years or more administrative experience		
	Male N=129	Female N=2	Overall N=131	Male N=131	Female N=5	Overall N=136
Discipline	13%	19%	13.1%	10.5%	7.5%	10.5%
General Managerial Duties	47.3%	18.5%	46.9%	49^%	42.5%	49.5%
Meeting with Parents	7.2%	5%	7.2%	6.96%	5%	6.9%
Working with Teachers	22.6%	28.5%	22.7%	23.6%	45%	23.9%

NOTE: Figures may not equal 100% total because some respondents also teach a substantial portion of the day and the survey answers are based on their non-instructional time.